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ABSTRACT

This study investigated what university and college department chairpersons believe are the most important duties of their position, how they view their roles, and the relationship of perceived roles and duties. Possible role definitions included seeing department chair work as leader, scholar, faculty developer, or manager. The study surveyed 800 department chairs from 100 higher education institutions with a 36-item questionnaire. Of those, 539 were returned. Analysis of the results indicated that chairs view those items which are of immediate benefit to the faculty and departments they chair as more important than activities which may benefit the university as a whole. Specifically, of the 10 chair duties selected as most important, eight describe aspects of faculty development, suggesting that chairs see assisting colleagues as of primary importance in their job. A clear association was seen between duties in which chairs believe they are effective and duties which they regard as most important. Gender differences between male and female chairs were observed with female chairs giving greater emphasis to remaining current in their discipline. In addition, leader and manager chairs who chair soft discipline departments gave greater emphasis to providing informal faculty leadership than did their hard discipline counterparts. (Contains 14 references.) (JB)

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The Relationship of Department Chair Roles to Importance of Chair Duties

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of
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ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Marriott City Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, October 29 - November 1, 1992. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

The Relationship of Department Chair Roles to Importance of Chair Duties

Endless meetings, stacks of paperwork, constant interruptions by telephones and drop-in visitors, and fragmented encounters on a multitude of topics all keep department chairs on the pace of a sprinter having to run long distances. Inevitably, chairs are required to pick and choose among the myriad of responsibilities before them. This study was undertaken to investigate what chairs believe are the most important duties of their position. To understand how chairs manage a department and facilitate productivity, we must know what chairs believe are their most important responsibilities.

Numerous lists of chair duties have appeared in the literature; ranging from Tucker's (1984) list of 54 tasks to Siever's 12 functions. These *lists* appear "to provide comprehensive coverage and have undergone considerable refinement through practical experience and statistical analysis" (Hoyt, 1979, p. 293). However, both practical and theoretically problems arise from these comprehensive lists of duties. Practically speaking, only a super human chair could perform all these duties. More realistically, department chairs select from areas of responsibility they feel most deserving of their attention (Bragg, 1981). Theoretically, a generic listing of duties could be misleading since different role-types of chairs may favor certain duties over others. Instead of resorting to this *pathology* of listing complex chair duties, theory and practice must move to a better understanding and clearer delineation of duties deemed important by effective chairs.

Department Chair Roles

The role orientation of individual chairs is likely to have the greatest influence on importance of the components of the department chair job. Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek and Rosenthal (1964) suggest that the role behaviors in officially prescribed roles vary based on attitudes individuals bring to the role. How individuals function in a specific role is a complex interaction of personal attitudes and social pressures from others within the organization. Role orientation is the basic unit

from which to examine a variety of issues, not least of which is a description of what chairs feel is important in their positions.

In addition, "department heads differ in their definition of the headship role. The differences in definition, however, represent differences in emphasis and priorities rather than differences in kind" (Bragg, 1981, p. 149). Therefore, the investigation of department chair roles should not assume that each role definition be viewed as an ideal type, but represents differences in emphasis.

McLaughlin, Montgomery and Malpass (1975) defined three predominant chair roles: *academic* (teaching, advising, encouraging research, faculty development, and curriculum development), *administrative* (maintaining budget, records and staff, and representing the department to other university organizations) and *leadership* (selecting supporting, developing, and motivating faculty members. Using the same data set, Smart and Elton (1976) factor analyzed department chairs' use of time in 27 duties and combined them into four roles or factors: a *faculty role* in developing and building faculty and morale, a *coordinator role* of representing the department to outside groups and department planning, a *research role* of obtaining grants and gifts and recruiting and supervising graduate students, and *instructional role* of teaching, advising and recording keeping. In 1981, Bragg conducted a study of 39 chairs at a single research university and identified a typology of four different chair orientations: *faculty* chairs identify their primary responsibilities as the recruitment, facilitation, and development of faculty; *external* chairs focus on department image and representation in groups outside of the department; *program* chairs are concerned with program and curriculum improvement; and *management* chairs take on coordination roles.

In more recent factor-analytic work (Carroll & Gmelch, 1992), four chair types appear. **Leader** chairs tend to be effective in leading the department in both internal and external issues. Internal department leadership includes: soliciting ideas to improve the department, planning and evaluating curriculum development, conducting department meetings, and informing the faculty of department, college and university concerns. Elements related to external leadership were:

coordinating departmental activities with constituents, representing the department at professional meetings, and participating in college and university committee work.

Scholar chairs reported being effective in a number of items related to their own scholarly productivity: obtaining resources for personal research, maintaining a research program, and remaining current within their academic discipline. These chairs also appear to be effectiveness in selecting and supervising graduate students.

Faculty Developer chairs feel effective in three related areas concerning the success of faculty in their pursuits. First, these chairs emphasized encouraging professional development efforts of faculty and encouraging faculty research and publication. Second, they mediate the relationship of faculty to the institution through providing informal faculty leadership, developing long-range department goals, and maintaining a conducive work climate. Third, issues of faculty evaluation are addressed through their effectiveness at recruiting and selecting faculty, and evaluating faculty performance.

Manager chairs describe skills in the custodial activities of a department, such as preparing and proposing budgets, managing departmental resources, maintaining records, managing staff, and assigning duties to faculty.

Four other variables have provided the power to discriminate among chairs in previous studies: means of hiring (Carroll, 1990; Jennerich, 1981), discipline category (Carroll, 1990; Carroll & Gmelch, 1992; Creswell, Seagren, & Henry, 1979; Smart, 1976), gender (Bowker, Hinkle, & Worner, 1983; Carroll, 1990) , and faculty/administrative orientation (Carroll, 1990; Carroll & Gmelch, 1992; Jennerich, 1981).

Study Design and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to extend the previous work on the role, attitudes, and behaviors of department chairs. Specifically this study sought to understand the relationship between each of the four types (roles) of department chairs and the relative importance these chairs place on their duties. Secondarily, the association of antecedent variables such as gender, discipline, department

hiring practices, and faculty/administrative orientation and the importance of duties by specific chair types will be investigated.

Instrument Development

Department chairs in 100 Carnegie Council *Research I and II,* and *Doctorate Granting I and II* institutions (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1987) were surveyed. Studies of department chairs (Creswell, & Bean, 1981; McLaughlin, Montgomery, & Malpass, 1975; Smart, 1976) have suggested that responses would vary dependent on the discipline of the respondents. In this study the Biglan (1973) model for classifying disciplines was used. Biglan clusters academic departments into eight cells based on tri-dimensional comparisons of characteristics of the subject matter of the discipline. One dimension is a determination of the degree to which a discipline has a developed paradigm—hard versus soft. Other dimensions are pure versus applied disciplines, and disciplines which study life systems versus non-life disciplines. The resulting classification names each discipline in terms of these variables (engineering is a hard, applied, non-life discipline). In this study, a department was randomly selected from each Biglan category in each institution, resulting in a sample size of 800 department chairs.

A 36 item questionnaire was sent to the sample chairs. Five hundred and thirty-nine questionnaires were return for a response rate of 67.5 percent. A list of 26 duties of department chairs was included. The list was compiled from the work of McLaughlin, et al (1975), Smart and Elton (1976), and Moses and Roe (1990).

Results

Chair duties were ranked in order of importance by percentage of 4 or 5 responses on a five point scale to the question, *how important to you is each chair duty* (Table 1). Twenty-one of the 26 duties were deemed important by 50 percent or more of the department chairs. Given the limited resources of chairs it seems prudent to focus on the ten duties chairs report as highly important by greater than 75 percent of the chairs: *recruit and select faculty, represent department to administration, evaluate faculty performance, encourage faculty research and publication,*

maintain conducive work climate, manage departmental resources, which includes reducing conflict among faculty, encourage professional development efforts of faculty, develop and initiate long-range departmental goals, provide informal faculty leadership, and *remain current within academic discipline.* Because these ten duties appear to represent the core of what chairs believe to be most important in their work, the remainder of the analysis focuses primarily on these ten duties.

Table 1 Percent of High (4 or 5) Responses to Chair Duties

	Chair Duties	Percent 4 or 5 Response
1	Recruit and select faculty	92.81
2	Represent department to administration	92.44
3	Evaluate faculty performance	90.17
4	Encourage faculty research and publication	88.66
5	Maintain conducive work climate, which includes reducing conflict among faculty	87.90
6	Manage departmental resources (finances, facilities, equipment)	84.63
7	Encourage professional development efforts of faculty	84.52
8	Develop and initiate long-range departmental goals	82.60
9	Provide informal faculty leadership	78.83
10	Remain current within academic discipline	78.11
11	Prepare and propose budgets	73.24
12	Maintain research program and associated professional activities	70.45
13	Solicit ideas to improve the department	70.45
14	Assign teaching, research and other related duties to the faculty	64.08
15	Teach and advise students	60.57
16	Inform faculty of department, college, and university concerns	57.17
17	Plan and conduct department meetings	55.95
18	Manage non-academic staff	54.82
19	Obtain resources for personal research	54.18
20	Plan and evaluate curriculum development	52.75
21	Assure the maintenance of accurate departmental records	50.10
22	Obtain and manage external funds (grants, contracts)	46.87
23	Select and supervise graduate students	42.75
24	Coordinate departmental activities with constituents	40.00
25	Represent the department at professional meetings	37.24
26	Participate in college and university committee work	31.88

Before examining significant differences related to the study variables *within* chair role types, some differences appeared when the variables were used to measure the sample as a whole.

Discipline

Biglan's (1973) model of discipline identification was used in this study to group disciplines. Biglan studies have consistently shown the dichotomy of hard and soft disciplines to have the greatest power to differentiate among chairs. Hard disciplines are those that have a commonly accepted set of problems and agreed upon methods to be used in their exploration. Soft disciplines have less well developed paradigms. In this study, hard discipline department chairs indicated that *develop and initiate long-range departmental goals, represent the department to the administration,* and *manage department resources* as significantly more important than soft discipline chairs.

Gender

Female chairs listed *encourage professional development efforts of faculty* and *encourage faculty research and publication* as significantly more important than male chairs.

Faculty/Administrative Orientation

Faculty/Administrative orientation was established by asking chairs if *as a university employee, do you consider yourself to be: an academic faculty member, an administrator, or equally a faculty member and an administrator.* Only six chairs identified themselves as solely administrator and that level was dropped from analysis. Chairs who consider themselves as equally faculty and administrator gave significantly more importance to *recruit and select faculty, manage department resources*, and *encourage faculty research and publication* than did chairs who consider themselves as primarily faculty. Faculty chairs listed *remain current with academic discipline* as significantly more important than chairs who consider themselves equally faculty and administrator.

Hiring Practices

Hiring practices of specific departments were categorized as hiring by: the faculty, the Dean or higher administrators, or equally by faculty and administration. No significant differences appeared for the whole sample on importance responses between hiring categories.

Chair Roles and Importance

Effectiveness in chair duties was used in a factor analysis that led to the identification of four chair role types(Carroll & Gmelch, 1992). Individuals with a propensity toward one or more of the roles were also identified. In this study, chair responses to questions concerning the importance of various chair duties and the interaction of other study variables were examined for each role.

Leader chairs attributed significantly greater importance to all top ten duties than other chairs except for *recruit and select faculty* (Table 2). When examining those who were identified as *leader* chairs, the chairs hired by deans or higher administrators listed *recruit and select faculty* as more important than those hired by faculty. The chairs hired by deans or higher also indicated that *maintain conducive work climate* was more important than those hired equally by faculty and administration. Soft discipline leader chairs attributed greater importance to *provide informal faculty leadership* and *remain current within academic discipline* than did hard discipline leader chairs. Of leader chairs, females indicated greater importance in *remain current within academic discipline* than did males. While still considering leader chairs, those who considered themselves to be equally faculty and administrator indicated that *providing informal faculty leadership* was significantly more important than did those chairs who considered themselves to be solely faculty. Faculty oriented chairs listed *remaining current within academic discipline* as more important that those who are equally faculty and administrator.

Scholar chairs indicated significantly greater importance than other chairs only to *remain current within academic discipline* (Table 3). Female scholar chairs gave greater importance to *encouraging faculty research and publication* than did male scholar chairs. Scholar chairs who consider themselves to be equally faculty and administrator indicated that *providing informal faculty leadership* was more important than faculty scholar chairs.

Developer chairs responded with significantly higher importance scores for all of the ten most important chair duties than all other chairs (Table 4). Of developer chairs those who consider themselves to be equally faculty and administrator listed *evaluate faculty performance, encourage*

professional development efforts of faculty, manage department resources, and encourage faculty research and *publication* as more important than did developer chairs who consider themselves to be predominantly faculty.

Manager chairs had significantly higher scores for most of the top ten duties with the exceptions of *recruit and select faculty, encourage professional development efforts of faculty,* and *remain current within academic discipline* (Table 5). Those manager chairs who were hired by deans or higher indicated *evaluate faculty performance* as more important than those hired by faculty. Hard discipline manager chairs listed *evaluate faculty performance* as more important than did soft discipline manager chairs. Soft discipline chairs indicated *provide informal faculty leadership* as more important than did hard manager chairs. Female manager chairs gave *encourage professional development efforts of faculty* and *encourage faculty research and publication* greater importance than did male manager chairs. Those manager chairs who consider themselves to be equally faculty and administrator listed *recruit and select faculty, provide informal faculty leadership,* and *manage department resources* as more important than did manger chairs who consider themselves as solely faculty.

Table 2. Effective Leader Chairs. (n=121)
Significant Differences in Means of Most Important Chair Duties Within Variable Groups

	Variable Groups				
Chair Duty	**Role** 1. Leader Chairs 2. All Other Chairs	**Hiring by** 1. Faculty 2. Dean or Higher Administrator 3. Equally by Both	**Discipline Category** 1. Hard 2. Soft	**Gender** 1. Male 2. Female	**Orientation** 1. Faculty 2. Equally Faculty and Administrator
Recruit and select faculty		(1) 4.40[d] (2) 4.92 (3) 4.71			
Represent department to administration	4.74[b] 4.54				
Evaluate faculty performance	4.66[c] 4.47				
Encourage faculty research	4.63[b] 4.42				
Maintain conducive work climate	4.60[b] 4.39	(1) 4.40[e] (2) 4.85 (3) 4.49			
Manage departmental resources	4.61[a] 4.34				
Encourage faculty development	4.46[c] 4.27				
Develop long-range departmental goals	4.57[a] 4.22				
Provide informal faculty leadership	4.44[a] 4.09		4.27[b] 4.60		4.22[c] 4.52
Remain current in academic discipline	4.47[a] 4.14		4.29[c] 4.60	4.40[b] 4.83	4.81[a] 4.35

a = $p < .001$; b = $p < .01$; c = $p < .05$; d = $p < .05$ between 1&2; e = $p < .05$ between 2&3
Means of non-significant comparisons were omitted for clarity

Table 3. Effective Scholar Chairs (n=123)
Significant Differences in Means of Most Important Chair Duties Within Variable Groups

	Variable Groups				
Chair Duty	**Role** 1. Leader Chairs 2. All Other Chairs	**Hiring by** 1. Faculty 2. Dean or Higher Administrator 3. Equally by Both	**Discipline Category** 1. Hard 2. Soft	**Gender** 1. Male 2. Female	**Orientation** 1. Faculty 2. Equally Faculty and Administrator
Recruit and select faculty					
Represent department to administration					
Evaluate faculty performance					
Encourage faculty research					
Maintain conducive work climate					
Manage departmental resources					
Encourage faculty development					
Develop long-range departmental goals					
Provide informal faculty leadership					4.00[b] 4.47
Remain current in academic discipline	4.58[a] 4.10			4.40[b] 4.83	

a = $p < .001$; b = $p < .01$
Means of non-significant comparisons were omitted for clarity

Table 4. Effective Developer Chairs (n=126)
Significant Differences in Means of Most Important Chair Duties Within Variable Groups

	Variable Groups				
Chair Duty	**Role** 1. Leader Chairs 2. All Other Chairs	**Hiring by** 1. Faculty 2. Dean or Higher Administrator 3. Equally by Both	**Discipline Category** 1. Hard 2. Soft	**Gender** 1. Male 2. Female	**Orientation** 1. Faculty 2. Equally Faculty and Administrator
Recruit and select faculty	4.88[a] 4.65				
Represent department to administration	4.77[b] 4.53				
Evaluate faculty performance	4.67[b] 4.47				4.52[c] 4.77
Encourage faculty research	4.80[a] 4.36				4.66[c] 4.89
Maintain conducive work climate	4.70[a] 4.35				
Manage departmental resources	4.60[b] 4.33				4.40[c] 4.73
Encourage faculty development	4.69[a] 4.19				4.54[c] 4.78
Develop long-range departmental goals	4.63[a] 4.19				
Provide informal faculty leadership	4.68[a] 4.00				
Remain current in academic discipline	4.42[b] 4.16				

a = $p < .001$; b = $p < .01$; c = $p < .05$
Means of non-significant comparisons were omitted for clarity

Table 5. Effective Manager Chairs (n=122)
Significant Differences in Means of Most Important Chair Duties Within Variable Groups

Chair Duty	Variable Groups: Role (1. Leader Chairs 2. All Other Chairs)	Hiring by (1. Faculty 2. Dean or Higher Administrator 3. Equally by Both)	Discipline Category (1. Hard 2. Soft)	Gender (1. Male 2. Female)	Orientation (1. Faculty 2. Equally Faculty and Administrator)
Recruit and select faculty					4.59[c] 4.91
Represent department to administration	4.78[a] 4.52				
Evaluate faculty performance	4.71[a] 4.46	(1) 4.47[d] (2) 4.92 (3) 4.65	4.86[c] 4.59		
Encourage faculty research	4.63[b] 4.42			4.59[a] 4.93	
Maintain conducive work climate	4.66[a] 4.37				
Manage departmental resources	4.79[a] 4.28				4.59[c] 4.88
Encourage faculty development				4.33[c] 4.73	
Develop long-range departmental goals	4.43[c] 4.26				
Provide informal faculty leadership	4.37[b] 4.11		4.21[c] 4.50		4.15[c] 4.49
Remain current in academic discipline					

a = $p < .001$; b = $p < .01$; c = $p < .05$; d = $p < .05$ between 1&2
Means of non-significant comparisons were omitted for clarity

Discussion

Chairs view those items which are of immediate benefit to the faculty and departments they chair as more important than activities which may benefit the university as a whole. Specifically, of the ten most important chair duties, eight are descriptors of effective faculty developer chairs: *recruit and select faculty, represent department to administration, evaluate faculty performance, encourage faculty research and publication, maintain conducive work climate, encourage professional development efforts of faculty, develop and initiate long-range departmental goals,* and *provide informal faculty leadership.* Apparently chairs see assisting their faculty colleagues as of primary importance in their job. *Participate in college and university committee work* holds the ignominious lowest position of importance to the chairs.

For the most part, the duties chairs indicated as most important were also duties in which chairs listed high effectiveness. The impression is that there is a clear association between the areas in which chairs believe they are effective in performing their duties and those areas they deem most important. The notable exception was *remain current within academic discipline.* Over 78 percent reported this as highly important and only 39 percent reported a high degree of effectiveness in this area. This contradiction is an obvious candidate for a major source of stress for chairs.

In general, effective chairs in each of the chair roles listed the majority of the chair duties as more important than those who were less effective. It appears that those who believe they are getting the job done also believe most aspects of the job are more important than those who are less successful. The exception is scholar chairs who do not describe any chair duty other than *remain current within academic discipline* as more important than the remainder of the sample. The description of scholar chairs is based solely on scholarship related activities and this distinction of the importance of remaining current follows in that path.

With respect to significant associations between department chair characteristics and importance of chair duties, hiring practices, discipline, gender, nor faculty/administrative orientation showed significant effects on beliefs about the importance of chair duties. Overall, this

reiterates the sense that chair roles as faculty developer, leader or manager are more powerful indicators of chair beliefs about the importance of chair duties. This generalization is less true for the scholar chair. Nevertheless, some of the significant associations between chair characteristics and chair beliefs about the importance of their work are worthy of discussion.

Gender Differences

Manager women chairs showed more nurturing tendencies than men by giving greater importance to *encouraging faculty research* and *encouraging professional development. Leader* and *scholar* female chairs also gave greater emphasis to *remaining current in discipline* than *leader* and *scholar* male chairs. Why these effective female chairs profess more emphasis to this aspect of personal work than their male counterparts is not readily apparent from this study. It is tempting to surmise that women chairs believe that the standard or level of scholarship by which they are evaluated may be somewhat higher than for male chairs, an assumption which is confirmed in the literature regarding male and female faculty members.

Discipline

Both *leader* and *manager* chairs who chair soft discipline departments gave greater emphasis to *provide informal faculty leadership* than did their hard discipline counterparts. This appears to be a reiteration of Neumann and Boris' (1978) finding that chairs in effective paradigm state departments (hard discipline) tend to use task oriented leadership. And, chairs in effective preparadigm state departments (soft discipline) tend to use a combination of task oriented and people oriented leadership.

Hiring Practices

Leader chairs who were hired by their deans attributed more importance to *recruit and select faculty* and *maintain conducive work climate* than other *leader* chairs. Also, *manager* chairs hired by deans gave more importance to evaluating faculty performance than *manager* chairs hired solely by faculty. This tendency may have been a precondition or requisite of their employment by the dean or higher administrator; a mandate if you will. Follow-up interviews with these chairs may be the most appropriate method of assessing this assumption,s veracity.

Faculty/Administrative Orientation

Faculty/administrative orientation proved to differentiate effective chairs in all roles. Predominantly this is a reiteration of the tendency for those who consider themselves to be equally both faculty and administrator to place greater emphasis on *providing informal faculty leadership.* In addition, *faculty developer* chairs who consider themselves to be equally both faculty and administrator emphasized those duties which are of immediate assistance to faculty (evaluating faculty, encouraging faculty research, and encouraging faculty development). *Developer* and *manager* chairs who indicate they are both faculty and administrator are more likely to emphasize *managing departmental resources* than those who are primarily faculty. Perhaps those effective chairs who see themselves as solely faculty see less need for *managing* the work of their colleagues. Faculty generally function autonomously and faculty oriented chairs may be less likely to impinge on that autonomy.

Conclusions

The nature of the important duties chairs perform is made clearer by these initial patterns or associations. A traditional position description includes all duties, usually with equal emphasis. Clearly, chairs believe that certain duties of the job are more important than others. As chairs are hired, trained, and socialized the actual emphasis shown to certain duties by chairs must be kept in mind.

In addition, the patterns of what chairs believe to be important do serve to better identify whether a chair may be associated with any particular chair role. Chairs who display emphasis in one role or another generally believe that the most important aspects of the chair position are even more important than other chairs. But importance does not do a particularly good job of differentiating chair role types. No clear patterns emerge that match uniquely with each of the role types. Neither do the factors of hiring, discipline, gender, or orientation help to clarify those patterns. Regardless, identifying the aspects of the chair job which consistently appear as most important goes a long way in reducing the confusion concerning precisely what it is that those in the chair position are likely to accomplish.

It is tempting from these data and others to begin conjecturing about the types of chairs and the importance they place on certain chair duties. Since the evidence is increasingly clear that chair role types such as *faculty developer, leader, manager,* and to a lesser extent *scholar* do exist, further research based on chairs' unique personal, positional, and attitudinal characteristics seems appropriate. These studies must be conducted if more generalizations are to be validated and helpful in the development of the roles and responsibilities of department chairs.

It might be expected that chairs share some expectations of what is important with their dean and faculty as well. For instance, in a study of SUNY at Buffalo, department faculty and chairs agreed that the chair must or should participate in the recruitment of all full-time faculty members (Falk, 1979). Faculty from that study seem likely to agree with the results of the top ten most important duties of chairs from this study. But, each group may also have unique views. Faculty may be primarily concerned with themselves, their own work, or the department as it affects their own work. Deans may be more concerned with management and leadership functions. And, chairs need to mediate between the demands of the department faculty and the administrative or external pressures. For example, Moses and Roe (1990) discovered that faculty expect chairs to put aside their own academic activities for a while, and teaching and teaching related activities were not regarded as of great importance. "Academic staff on the whole are not concerned with how well the head is performing as an academic during the term as head, but how well he/she is doing within the University" (p. 63).

Regardless, comparing attitudes of chairs with the attitudes of those they lead and are led by is an appropriate next step in better understanding the complex nature of the department chair's position.

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